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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000342

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [TPHY](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: KAUST: GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND LABOR PAINS

REF: JEDDAH 0047

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) In September 4 pre-opening ceremony of King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), the university administrators and event organizers aimed to project a modern image of Saudi Arabia by aggressively promoting themes of multiculturalism and green energy. Classes started on September 5, and the official inauguration scheduled for September 23 (Saudi National Day) is expected to attract extensive media coverage, and will be attended by a number of international leaders. While most of the highly restrictive social, cultural, and religious norms of Saudi Arabia were not to be enforced within the walls of KAUST, American graduate students, who appear to be suffering their own cultural adjustment issues, reported many signs of conservatism among other KAUST students who appear to have lobbied successfully to reverse some of the university's promised liberal policies. END SUMMARY.

PRE-OPENING EVENT -- CHAOTIC EFFORT TO PROJECT A
MODERN, MORE TOLERANT IMAGE OF THE KINGDOM

12. (U) KAUST organized a pre-opening ceremony on the eve of the September 5 first day of classes. The diplomatic missions of all the countries represented in the KAUST student body were invited to participate in a fair that provided country-specific displays, and were encouraged to hand out flags, educational materials, and cultural brochures. The American booth was managed by PD officers and LES from the US Consulate in Jeddah.

13. (U) Oil Minister and Chairman of KAUST board of trustees Ali Ibrahim Al-Naimi was the senior Saudi presence at the pre-opening ceremony along with KAUST founding president, Professor Shih Choon Fong (former National University of Singapore president and Harvard-Ph.D. engineer). Nobel Laureate and founder of Grameen bank Muhammad Yunus delivered the keynote speech that focused on ending global poverty through empowering women, the economically disadvantaged, and residents of rural areas.

14. (C) Under the overarching themes of multiculturalism and green energy, the university administrators and event organizers clearly aimed to project a modern, more tolerant image of Saudi Arabia. The event promoted KAUST as an international university and not a Saudi university through flag displays of all the countries represented in the KAUST student body, a recording of multiple KAUST students saying "knowledge" in their native language, and a multiethnic dinner served after the ceremony. During the event, an elaborate pre-recorded modern dance performance was projected on a giant screen, but only the silhouette of the performers appeared, though the performers were of both genders. Photography was not permitted during the ceremony.

CONSTRUCTION -- AN ARAMCO WORK IN PROGRESS

15. (C) Despite ARAMCO's 6-month, 24/7 efforts to finish building the campus prior to the official inauguration on Saudi National Day (September 23),

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about half the campus is still under construction, with many roads on and around campus still unpaved and poorly lit. The event's organizers steered visitors away from the unfinished parts of campus, and only allowed movement within the pre-opening celebration area. With about 2,000 invitees, the atmosphere was generally cheerful but chaotic due to the ongoing construction and lack of coordination among the event organizers. A senior ARAMCO project manager explained that visitors face difficulties in finding KAUST due to the series of fences that were built to shield the KAUST community from the construction workers who are still on site.

MULTI-NATIONAL STUDENT BODY -- CAMPUS HOUSING
AND FACILITY PROBLEMS

16. (C) September 5, 2009 marked the official start of classes. The university kicked off its first semester with about 400 graduate students from 70 countries. There are 100 Saudi students currently enrolled at KAUST, and a total of 80 female students from different countries. The largest contingent of international students comes from China with 40 students, followed by the U.S. with 33 students, a lower number than the previous estimate of 60-70 reported in February 2009 (reftel). (Japan has three students while Korea has two at KAUST.) American students are mostly enrolled in Master's programs, but there may be one or two Ph.D. students. Only one American student is accompanied by a spouse, and most are recent graduates of major universities such as Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Penn State, University of California at Santa Barbara, Rice, and the University of Massachusetts to name a few. Female students reported that their "apartment-style" housing accommodations were comfortable and reasonable. On the other hand, several male students complained about rats, lack of running water, and in some cases

missing beds within the male student housing district
-- consisting at least partially of dormitories.

¶7. (C) Many American students seem to have been attracted to KAUST due to its free tuition policy, the stipends paid, and the promise of state-of-the-art educational and research facilities. The students have a generally positive first impression of KAUST's faculty members who are mostly recruited from the U.S. However, students noted that as of the first day of classes, textbooks were unavailable and the university library shelves were mostly empty.

CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS -- GENDER SEGREGATION

¶8. (C) Some American students take the view that even if the academics do not quite meet expectations, their time at KAUST will be an "all-expense paid cultural experience." It appears that most of the students are unaware of the basics of Saudi culture. Initially, the students were promised very limited gender segregation on campus and that women could drive within the walls of KAUST. In response to complaints submitted by KAUST conservative Muslim students, the university decided to segregate swimming pools and sports facilities into male, female, and family facilities. In response, the American students are petitioning to allow mixed gender sports facilities as originally promised. Gender segregation is strictly enforced in student housing as well. This policy has prompted the American students to request to be transferred to temporary housing on campus where the social rules will be less strictly enforced.

¶9. (C) On one occasion, a conservative Syrian student prevented the American students from singing

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"Happy Birthday" to a fellow student on a university shuttle on the grounds that singing is "un-Islamic" or "haram." Another American female student reported that Saudi women students refused to doff their abayas (long black cloaks) during a female-only university organized boat trip on the Red Sea.

INAUGURAL EXPECTATIONS AND MEDIA

¶10. (C) The official inauguration ceremony will be held on Saudi National Day, September 23, the date being a clear message from King Abdullah about his vision for KAUST's role in shaping the future of Saudi Arabia. The university has invited many heads of state. Only a few have confirmed attendance (the presidents of Lebanon, Turkey and the Philippines and the kings of Jordan and Bahrain) although a number of Arab leaders (including so far the Minister of Higher Education of Egypt and the Ruler of Sharjah, UAE) are expected to attend. With KAUST's invitation of reporters from the 70 countries represented in the student body, the inauguration is expected to receive extensive media coverage. A senior inauguration coordinator informed post that CNN, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and possibly FOX News were planning on covering the ceremony.

COMMENT -- CHALLENGING SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

¶11. (C) KAUST is regarded as a bold, earnest attempt by King Abdullah to transform Saudi society from within. The university's remote location, vast resources, and independence from the Saudi Ministry of Education reflect the King's desire to create a world-class academic institution while keeping the

religious authorities at bay. The fact that the university has already bent to the demands of some conservative Muslim students illustrates the challenge the King faces with his social experiment. The ability of KAUST to transform Saudi society beyond its walls and the future of the university after King Abdullah are two key issues that are hard to predict. Post will continue to monitor the experiences of American students and professors at KAUST. END COMMENT.
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